Culminating in the assault on the Capitol in January 2021, intense cultural and economic grievances have divided the American polity for years, undermining trust in the institutions of US democracy. Politicians have exploited and deepened these divisions. Are there viable pathways for restoring the legitimacy of the American model of democracy and development? How might the political divisions associated with demographic change and economic inequality be tempered? Will the American polity develop a greater sense of unity and common purpose in the face of common adversaries, such as China and Russia?

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The American Model of Democracy

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Introduction

Defining the American identity into one or few categories will reveal as much clarity as taking a pulse to understand one’s conscience. The diverse range of cultures and preferences, in and of itself, characterizes the necessary nature of a thriving liberal democracy. However, American governance continues to grapple with the balance of management and liberty. Liberalism necessitates liberty to mitigate abuse by tyrannical authority as well as competing ambitions to mitigate majority factions. Yet, harmonious and productive states necessitate moderation, order, and structure. The American Democracy is charged with the duality of this balancing act within the context of inherent dynamism. Accepting that American Democracy is in a permanent state of fluidity is required for a sound evaluation of theories on the way forward in the United States.

Differences, Conflict, and the Effects of Political Polarization in America

Different perspectives on social rifts and economic policies persist as particular themes that keep the two major Political Parties in opposition through the sixth party system, a symptom of how the Parties have aggregated citizen demands. Perpetuating this distinction are the cues led by political leaders and motivated elites to sway the public in ways that align the party’s platform best with the presumed preference of its respective constituency. The American body politic observes these differences in exaggerated and exacerbated forms in response to problems that receive nationwide visibility in the media. Correspondingly, the juxtaposition of partisan reactions – also amplified on media platforms – polarize political views on a given issue and push each side further into their respective corners. Furthermore, based on each Party’s deemed set of shared values, Americans observe further fragmentation on preferences for governmental approaches ranging from authoritarian to libertarian within these politically partisan silos.

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a A party system is “a period in which the names of the major political parties, their supporters, and issues dividing them have remained relatively stable.” The U.S. has had six party systems since 1789, changing by way of realignment of the party coalitions or in the nature of the issues that divide the parties. Our first party system started with the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans disagreed chiefly on the location of the capital and financial issues. Moving through four other party systems led us to our current and sixth party system where Democrats and Republicans disagree mainly on the size and scope of federal government, civil rights, social issues, and foreign policy.
Theorists have described this conflictual state in different ways that offer competing if valid considerations for what governance can or cannot affect. Robert Putnam’s I-We-I curve, “[an] inverted U charting America’s gradual climb from self-centeredness to a sense of shared values, followed by a steep descent back into egoism over the next half century” captures an aggregated view of the effect American culture has on the governance problem set.

A Theoretical Framework on American Political Thought

Discord in the American Political Landscape

Civil discord is the competitive conflict that our founders sought to instill vis-à-vis our system of checks and balances to secure our way of life from being feasibly overtaken by any one power, whether domestic majority factions or external threats. The nature of how the structure of American governance was intended to interact implies that we can always expect disagreement in perpetuity notwithstanding the everchanging and evolving topics debated overtime. The two-party system was organically established by way of competing interests that organized into opposing sides. This duel of two strong opponents provides each citizen a means of preserving individual interests through mutual preservation, a benefit of commonwealths as theorized by John Locke.

America’s current political landscape consists of the Democrat Party and Republican Party as dueling political competitors; however, the American public’s understanding and perception of the nature and priorities of the Parties vary across the Nation. Matt Grossman and David Hopkins describe the differences between the major American Political Parties by representing that the Republican Party is primarily an ideological movement that prizes doctrinal purity, while the Democrat Party is a coalition of social groups seeking concrete government action. These descriptions imply a wide range of nuance, but generally these descriptions can explain the broad views of how each group seemingly interprets the best approach to upholding liberty. The Republican Party pursues liberty by way of principles that aim to uphold traditions seen as societal stabilizers that empower individuals to thrive while exercising freedom. The Democrat Party pursues liberty by way of contextualizing social responsibility to warrant opportunity and mitigate oppression especially for the least advantaged individuals.

Notwithstanding theoretical frameworks that anchor Parties to an extent, their approaches also experience variation while navigating the political landscape. Actions by the Parties are heavily agenda-based and election-driven, with interest groups and activists controlling the reins. Another dimensional layer affecting Party approaches includes how the parties are perceived. Ahler and Sood found surveyed Americans to widely share misperceptions by overestimating party-stereotypical membership by party supporters. The partisan effect causes even less preciseness when perceptions come from biased out-party views and by those most interested in politics. Polarization is a considerable consequence of this perceptual bias. Goals for advancing agendas and political favor within the context of consequential misperceptions exacerbate political discord in the U.S.

A worthwhile literature review should explore evolving cycles of Party values and priorities to understand recurring themes that can help theorists to organize and address a comprehensive
problem statement. One theme worth noting are the competing conclusions based in populism. As Americans align with their preferred Political Party, both groups manifest substantial sects of voters whose decisions and thoughts are based in an idea of a neglected citizen who falls victim to the privileges and entitlements of elites, political leaders, and established institutions.\footnote{12} While the logical premise is the same, partisan divides produce populists with directly opposing stances to address the abandonment issue they seek to confront. Populism is just one of many premises that lead to polarized political attitudes. Reasonable citizens come down on different conclusions on many given political issues. While we can identify particular points throughout the plethora of political issues that cause or exacerbate polarization, Americans cannot reasonably expect to reconcile the differences between the parties as a feasible solution. Instead, Americans are left to accept that these disagreements exist and persist based on everchanging socioeconomic and geopolitical factors.

**The Way Forward for American Democracy and Plausible Theories**

Addressing the primary problem themes in the current American political landscape, one should explore plausible theories that enable Americans to achieve a thriving liberal democratic state. We must define this goal-state of a *thriving liberal democratic state* within the context of the political rifts that persist throughout the American political party system. Hereinafter, *thriving liberal democratic state* for the U.S. thereby refers to a nation-state where differing political opinions coexist in harmonious or at least tolerant and reciprocal environments while benefitting from the diversity of political aims that advance American policies and effectiveness of governance.

Such a thriving state aligns with political theorists that informed the foundations of American Political Thought – Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Hobbes and Locke justified the significance of a social contract that promotes mutual preservation of communal interests, wellbeing, and liberty at the hand of robust governance. Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations of the fledgling U.S. in the 19th century found that democracy gleans from an equality of conditions. However, he argued that equal conditions are subject to a tyranny of the majority when selfish individualism is not checked by political associations and strong shared principles.\footnote{13} America builds upon the blueprints offered by Hobbes and Locke. However, America faces an interminable challenge in its attempt to address Tocqueville’s warning: that of evolving social norms and technological innovations by which ideologies spread rampantly, enables a majority to wield influence as a form of power that can become tyrannical. Tocqueville’s theoretical framework of a moral empire of the majority thereby predicted the rapid growth of polarization within American democracy. To build on Tocqueville’s blueprint for addressing excessive democracy, we should therefore explore plausible theories that aim to address the selfish nature of individualism using political associations and shared principles as checking mechanisms. The following theories offer starting points for three main theoretical pathways: a political philosophy framework, a social theory framework, and an economic theory framework.

Levitzky and Ziblatt in *The Crisis of American Democracy* posit that the key to upholding the strength of the American institution’s accountability mechanisms is to reinforce them with
democratic norms: mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. While the constraints provided by the U.S. institutional structure have successfully limited political power, preventing attempts at tyrannical abuse, institutions alone cannot protect democracy. We must supplement American democracy with an acceptance of the legitimacy of our partisan rivals (mutual tolerance) as well as exercise self-restraint with power legally available to us (institutional forbearance).

Rachel Kleinfeld suggests a five-point strategy to address the disintegrating and illiberal effects of polarization that confronts electoral and social drivers of democratic backsliding.14 (1) support prodemocracy candidates with money, fusion voting, and cross-party voting to ensure antidemocratic candidates lose; (2) reduce social demand for illiberalism by providing counter-extremism support for populations at risk for violent or antidemocratic views; (3) build campaigns to meet people’s information needs and inoculate bad information; (4) create multistranded resilience strategies that bridge state and local communities by connecting civil society, government, and law enforcement to reduce extremism and potential violence; and (5) reform the Electoral Count Act to strengthen laws that address threats to democracy during the election process.

William Galston and Elaine Kamarck argue that American democracy is backsliding towards failure and that democratic failure represents a systemic risk. In their report, “Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?” Galston and Kamarck posit that large investment institutions in the private sector should be encouraged to take deliberate and involved steps in the vigilant fight for democracy by emphasizing and proliferating their rewards for doing so. The private sector’s incentives to support democratic institutions that uphold liberty are inextricably linked to its calculus of mutual risks and benefits that should allow prosperity to flourish.15

**Anticipated Challenges**

Each theory depends on America’s ability to check excessive freedom from developing unprincipled, arbitrary moral empires; however, this poses a major challenge to American democracy in that it requires some constraint on liberty. Friedrich Nietzsche extended Plato’s theory on the adverse effects of equalizing by describing how States that value liberty and equality in the name of freedom fall prey to convoluted views on good and bad dualism. Nietzsche argues that this inverted morality, when adopted by the masses, can inevitably lead to a nihilistic state where equality and liberty are prioritized at the expense of ambition for excellence and competitive innovation.16 In light of such theoretical frameworks, theories that seek to identity the foundations of a robust American democracy must anticipate critiques that warn against unthoughtful equalizing or excessive liberty that might compromise true freedom.

Theories on how to achieve thriving liberal democracies will inevitably fail to capture the interests of all cultures in the U.S. simply because there is no single, shared culture that truly spans the entirety of the nation. For this reason, Eric Foner in *Who Owns History? – Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*, concludes that it is impossible to define “American” in terms of culture.17 Foner goes on to show how the definition of American culture has necessarily evolved
when tracing from the original, unspecific language on citizenship in U.S. founding documents through inclusive social changes. Cultural changes generally happened as Americans stopped challenging the social acceptance of previously oppressed cultures (both civic- and ethnic-based) writ large. However, the challenge of accommodating all interests of these cultures that makeup contemporary America despite nationwide tolerance is that the evolution was not a linear trend of increasing inclusivity; rather, American culture evolved as a multidimensional debate of acceptance, tolerance, and treatment of and by different social groups. The paths by which members of different political groups arrived at this end-state variegated through different events, times, and regions in the U.S. American governance cannot reasonably expect to accommodate each of these variances.

Since pure equality is impossible to attain, inherent inequality becomes a political competition of who gets to decide what policies or values take precedence over others. America is not immune to this inevitable state of inequality due the liberal tenets that enable and encourage a capitalist state. On the other hand, liberal tents also enable an ongoing fight to protect the rights of disadvantaged populations to establish a precedent for righteousness and to mitigate collateral damage to surrounding communities; this liberal political aim also generates inherent inequality because pursuing equitable outcomes requires a disproportionate level of priority to disadvantaged communities over those who are otherwise deemed as not demographically disadvantaged. How to manage a state of inherent inequality within the context of American liberalism, which highly values equality and freedom, is the overarching challenge to any theory on democratic sustainability and is often a factor in democratic backsliding.

Finally, these theories rest on the assumption that Americans value a democratic regime. However, the attitudes of most of the American public suggest otherwise. Matthew Graham and Milan Svolik found that only 3.5 percent of survey respondents were willing, in principle, to withdraw their support for a candidate for office if she or he displayed undemocratic behavior. A similarly low percentage (about 3.6 percent) of voters changed their vote in response to a real-world scenario. Graham and Svolik find that the low value assigned to democracy is not due to a failure on the part of Americans to understand what democracy is and is not; rather, voter behaviors indicate a disproportionately higher value for partisan loyalty to their respective parties over the preservation of democratic tendencies (e.g. repulsion from antidemocratic candidates or events by committing their vote elsewhere). If partisanship presents an obstacle for Americans to more appropriately prioritize democracy, theories aiming to advance the country toward a more liberal democratic state may lack sufficient value if they do not address the problem of partisan political culture.

Effects on America within the Great-Power Context

The domestic disputes within any major State in the world present an opportunity for adversaries to exploit instability to sow further discord. A rational adversary will grant considerable thought to exploiting a powerful State that is confronting conspicuous challenges related to governance. If we accept that the crux of America’s status as a global leader rests on it being perceived as an indispensable nation and enabler of a democratic and prosperous world, Americans should apprehend the consequences of global perceptions that American democracy is in decay. The
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U.S. cannot discount the international opinion of its status as the world leader for democracy, even if public-facing assessments do not accurately reflect the true conditions of American democracy – whether seen as collapsing or burgeoning. In 2021, only 17 percent of worldwide survey respondents viewed the U.S. as a good example of democracy for others to follow. The same survey by Pew Research gathered that 72 percent of American respondents did not believe that U.S. democracy was a good example for others to follow. Further, 53 percent of worldwide respondents agreed with the American perception while 23 percent worldwide do not believe the U.S. was ever a good example for democracy. Revisionist powers wield opportunities to undermine the U.S. within the international order when possible. Given the accessible coverage of American domestic relations, a level of domestic polarization that suggests signs of anarchical headway can cast the U.S. in an alluring spotlight to keen adversaries.

With such strategic consequences, the polarization in American democracy primes a military strategy where entropy can disrupt our focus and effectiveness. The evolving battlefields in the cyber and space domains demand competitive strategies for world powers. The cyber domain implies a battlefield realm that holds competing States vulnerable when they have exploitable domestic relations visible on the world stage. Consequences that the U.S. already experiences regularly are the disinformation campaigns and talent poaching conducted by Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. Adversaries in cyber space can gain advantages through this psychological warfare, a layer of military advancement within the cyber realm, that goes beyond cyber attacks attempting to penetrate information systems with valuable data such as banking information or intellectual property. Further, domestic disorder compromises the traction and speed that the U.S. needs to effectively compete in the race to space. The space domain has observed a competition among world powers like the U.S., China, Russia, Europe, and Pakistan for technological innovations and strides that advance space exploration and research. As internal rifts lead to a widening gap within the U.S. partisan divide, China’s aggressive progress in the space domain increasingly closes the gap between Beijing and Washington by way of threats to U.S. satellites and other infrastructure within the final frontier.

Conclusion

Salient events in the U.S. have produced a groundswell of polarizing stances that tear at the fabric of a robust liberal democracy. While America’s founding philosophies anticipated risks associated with inevitable conflict spurred by competing ambitions, modern technological advances in media and communication have deepened political cleavages to an extreme degree. While it is unreasonable to expect a proverbial handshake that would ensure equitable compromise on polarizing issues, the fate of American democracy requires the effective management of these differences at home and the display of a reasonably united front to the world in order to deter ill-wishing foreign adversaries. The current perceptions of American democracy as a backsliding, divided State create an imperative and impetus for exploring plausible theories to reverse this trend and instead enable thriving liberalism. This effort should be made in pursuit of more principled and organized approaches to electing representatives and policymaking despite persisting disagreements on political issues. In the face of the obstacle of partisanship, American democracy must make every effort to collectively uphold the virtues of
liberty. Only by revitalizing a culture and institutions that foster but also temper political conflict will the United States reclaim its position as the world’s bellwether for democracy.

**Suggested Reading**

*Literature Review on Political Polarization in the U.S.*:

Accessible survey on the literature of polarization by Ezra Klein: *Why We Are Polarized* (2021) or his many podcasts surrounding this literature on “The Ezra Klein Show.”

Samuel Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1983); alternatively, this summary article from Foreign Affairs [here](#).

*Anticipated Challenges:*


*Plausible Theories on the Way Forward for Democracy:*


William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, “[Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?](#)” January 2022, *Brookings Institute*

*Civilian-military relations as it relates to polarization:*


Dieuwertje Kuijpers, “[Rally around All the Flags: The Effect of Military Casualties on Incumbent Popularity in Ten Countries 1990-2014](#),” July 2019, *Foreign Policy Analysis*

*Sorting out domestic affairs to fortify against external threats to democracy:*

Zselyke Csaky, “[The Antidemocratic Turn](#),” 2021, *Freedom House*

1 Madison. Federalist 10
2 Plato. The Republic
3 Bianco and Canon, American Politics Today (7th Edition), 2021
4 Mathew Rigdon, SCUSA Theme Paper
5 Putnam, “Why did Racial Progress Stall in America?”, 2020
6 Federalist 10, Federalist 51, and Federalist 08
7 Duverger’s Law
8 John Locke Second Treatise
13 Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1835-1840.
15 William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, “Is democracy failing and putting our economic system at risk?” January 2022, Brookings Institute
16 Friedrich Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morality, 1887
19 Mathew Rigdon. “Restoring the Promise of Democracy and Global Order: American Foreign Policy in an Era of Polarized Politics and Revisionist Powers” (2022), SCUSA 73
21 Mathew Rigdon. “Restoring the Promise of Democracy and Global Order: American Foreign Policy in an Era of Polarized Politics and Revisionist Powers” (2022), SCUSA 73
23 Mathew Rigdon. “Restoring the Promise of Democracy and Global Order: American Foreign Policy in an Era of Polarized Politics and Revisionist Powers” (2022), SCUSA 73